

# Robert Priseman

## Interviews Geraint Evans

RP: At the heart of all of your work seems to be a paradox. We are looking at something, such as a figure in the landscape or a hut by a tree, yet when we look closer we notice that the landscape is probably an artificial backdrop, or the tree an artificial Christmas tree. What is it about creating visual contradictions that appeals to you so much?

GE: On a basic level, I am interested in surprising and unexpected juxtapositions and how they might confound or challenge our perception of the world. This approach can also generate humour in the work. Some of these juxtapositions are pure inventions and so I have depicted an active volcano in a theme park ride or hermits lurking in suburban driveways and gardens. Others, such as a giant redwood tree trunk elevator in a department store were observed at first hand. This playful simulation used to be in a Mothercare shop in the Purley Way, Croydon – a signifier of a vast, wild landscape in as urban a setting as you could imagine.

For some time now, I have been interested in the ways in which we encounter and perceive the natural world, particularly from an urban-based position. Landscape is always viewed through a cultural lens and we constantly seek to manage, shape or even simulate the natural world. Our experiences are often mediated by tourism and our perceptions shaped by historic and cultural conventions. I am interested in how this manifests itself in gardens and national parks, theme parks or even in the high street or shopping mall. This naturally creates some fascinating “visual contradictions” as you put it.

RP: You grew up in Wales, which as we know has a beautiful and ‘wild’ landscape containing many mountains and stretches of coast and which is visited by many tourists each year. I feel that where we come from, the very environment itself, helps shape our cultural identity, and by turns the cultural output we ourselves produce. Do you feel that the landscape and environment of your youth has had an influence on you as an artist and the paintings you produce?

GE: I was born in Yate near Bristol and moved to Swansea when I was one year old. Both my parents are Welsh speakers - my mother grew up in rural West Wales and my dad in a small pit village called Garnant, which is where John Cale of the Velvet Underground is from. Welsh culture had a major influence on my work when I was a student. During my BA in Manchester I drew upon the poetry of Dylan Thomas and Vernon Watkins and the paintings of Ceri Richards – all of whom hailed from Swansea. I think that immersing myself

in the culture of my hometown helped me make sense of leaving home and establishing a sense of my independent identity.

In my final show at the Royal Academy, I questioned the sometimes clichéd cultural vestiges of Wales. I painted ladies in national costume and Welsh dressers; corgi dogs and bara brith. These cultural symbols are important in creating a sense of identity and belonging but they can also feel empty and outmoded. In one large painting I juxtaposed a stark photorealist image of the old Severn Bridge with found images of men greeting sheep by the cartoonist Gren, whose work caricatured Valley life.

Not long after I left college, I decided to turn my attention to other things but the influence of Wales is still there with references to the Big Apple snack shop in the Mumbles, a car park at the foot of Snowdon, an end-of-peer amusement attraction in Llandudno, the dinosaur park in Dan-yr-Ogof, a model village in Anglesey. I think that it is the landscape of suburban Swansea - the suburban outskirts where the built and natural environments meet – rather than a truly ‘wild’ Welsh landscape that has had a more significant influence. It was here that my interest in fabricated nature and in the hobbyist, class and upward mobility emerged. I moved back to suburbia a few years ago and I find it just as fascinating today, despite its enduring reputation for conformity and blandness.

RP: How fascinating to hear about the way you have engaged with these multiple external factors in developing your own visual language.

I notice in looking over your work that your painting appears to have undergone a fundamental shift around 2002. After this date, your paintings become more richly textured in terms of both their visual and intellectual content. Can you tell us why?

GE: It is interesting that you should say that. I actually think the shift came about 3 years earlier in 1999. It was at this time, quite by chance that I began to use the photographs that I had taken during a residency at the Banff Centre for the Arts, Alberta, Canada in 1994, a year after graduating from the Royal Academy Schools. The Centre is situated within the Banff National Park, a visually stunning mountain landscape that contains some of Canada’s most celebrated natural sights such as Lake Louise and Moraine Lake. The residency had been a wonderfully stimulating experience but I had needed time and distance to understand how to respond to the landscape within my practice.

‘Terry’, painted in 1999, depicts a fictional amateur artist in his bedsit room making paintings of the Rocky Mountain landscape that he will never visit. The pictorial language of the painting is deliberately flat and stylised and has something of the Sunday painter about it. I put a number of my interests and experiences into the painting - from the trip to Banff to working as a picture hanger at the Mall Galleries, which hosted exhibitions by a number of

curious art societies such as the Royal Society of Marine Artists. I was interested in the hobbyist, in suburbia and the portrait and in many ways this is a self-portrait as I found myself painting the same idealised and distant landscape again and again. By using the Banff photographs I opened up a whole new discourse for the work.

RP: When I look at your paintings I'm most reminded of stained glass windows, but interpreted as a secular and 'existentialist' 21<sup>st</sup> century art form. What is your feeling about that?

GE: I had never thought of it in those terms. Perhaps this has something to do with the work's appearance - its seemingly flat surface and stylised pictorial language? This developed from an interest in illustration whilst I was still at college - from Ladybird Books to Victorian medical illustrations to the diagrams in contemporary health and safety manuals. The Ladybird Book illustrators are, of course, universally admired and illustrators such as Harry Wingfield have had their work shown in galleries such as the New Gallery Walsall. Indeed, the writer John Grindrod gave a really interesting talk about the place of Modernism in Ladybird books at Wimbledon College of Arts last year. In comparison the illustrations in health and safety manuals seem more functional and didactic and yet they are designed to illustrate moments of trauma and panic. Again, I find this paradox interesting and a little absurd.

The work's use of narrative and the direct approach to composition may also have something to do with it. I have painted the hermit, a traditional subject for religious painting, a number of times. Although I am interested in the very many depictions of St Jerome in art history for example - and Joachim Patinir's 'Saint Jerome in a Rocky Landscape', which is in the National Gallery collection is one of my favourite paintings - it is the ornamental hermit that fascinates me. The ornamental hermit emerged in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as a result of the English Landscape Garden tradition. As the name suggests they were not real hermits but were employed to live within the grounds of country estates, within purpose built hermitages and grottoes, to appear for the amusement of the owner and guests. I continue to find this a fascinating subject.

Despite the largely secular nature of my work, it was included in a recent publication 'God Art' by Alastair Gordon. Within the book, Gordon recounts a visit that he made to the Holy Land Experience, a Christian theme park in Orlando, Florida where Jesus is crucified and resurrected every day at 3pm. We share an interest in the theme park and in Umberto Eco's essay 'Travels in Hyperreality' and this led Gordon to make some connections with my depictions of fabricated and simulated landscapes.

RP: I'm really interested in your being influenced by illustrators in this way, and that illustrators can be exhibited in art museums and inspire fine artists like yourself. Illustrators

work to demonstrate practical acts, which brings to mind the question many people ask “Is that art?” And subsequently highlights the movement some curators like Alistair Hudson propose that art should be useful.

I feel by definition that art cannot be useful, but is instead engaged in the creation of metaphor - which leads me to a two-part question. Do you feel that art can be useful? And, do you feel your own work is engaged with creating metaphors, and if so, what might they be?

GE: I think that Alistair Hudson has some interesting ideas about the way in which art is generated within the institution and its role within society more generally. I think that Hudson’s ideas about art’s usefulness are perhaps easier to understand when thinking about relational and socially engaged practices. Art’s value can be measured in a range of ways and the idea that it can be embedded in and applied to other fields is quite exciting. The Artist Placement Group, co-founded by John Latham in the late 1960s, advocated embedding artists within companies and government departments, suggesting that they should be paid a similar wage to other employees. I have also seen ideas about art’s usefulness applied in education – for example, Plymouth College of Art have opened a free school in which art is placed at the heart of the curriculum (unusual in this day and age), the idea being that creative thinking, so crucial to art practice, can be applied to teaching and learning in any subject.

The interesting question is what this means for painters who are often involved in quite hermetic practices and who produce material objects that have a monetary value. Painters do bring their particular perspectives to interdisciplinary projects working with scientists, archaeologists or historians and perhaps painting’s usefulness can be more easily measured in these circumstances. But, again, it is a question of what our definition of usefulness and value are. Painting’s ability to shape our perception and understanding of the world is still a compelling argument for its continued relevance. Painters also contribute to political discourse – for example, Kiefer and Baselitz challenged German people to confront their recent traumatic history in the 1960s/ early 1970s.

I don’t think actively about metaphors but I am interested in how certain objects or situations can act as signifiers for something else. Perhaps a good example is ‘Homebase’ 2011, which depicts a shop display for child’s play cabin that also acts as a signifier of the American West – a nostalgic image of the pioneer cabin that has been shaped by literature, film and television from the Searchers to Little House on the Prairie. It seems to appeal to a desire to embrace a romantic notion of wild nature but from the safety of the back garden. I return to these kinds of signifiers again and again.

RP: How fascinating Geraint, there is certainly a lot to consider in your answer about the role of art and the part artists play within society at large, and also how an artist may wish to consider the role of their output from a wide variety of perspectives.

May I now ask, which painters do you tend to look to most for inspiration?

GE: The David Hockney retrospective at Tate Britain recently reminded me of how important he had been to me when I was a student. It was thrilling to see the large portraits such as 'American Collectors (Fred and Marcia Weisman)' and 'Christopher Isherwood and Don Bachardy' together in one room. Hockney's economic pictorial language and his ability to locate his subjects through his use of light (New York or California) is really instructive. I certainly adopted the way in which he painted grass or shag pile rugs into my own work! Historic artists from van Eyck to Zurbarán to Velázquez are important to me. More apposite are the Hudson River School – Thomas Cole, Frederic Edwin Church, Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Moran – whose work was presented in the exhibition 'American Sublime: Landscape Painting in the United States 1820-1880' at Tate Britain in 2002. I remember this show as a real revelation that opened up lots of ideas about the ways in which artists picture the natural world and how the landscape can be seen in political terms.

Contemporary painters that have directly influenced the work include Mamma Andersson, John Currin, Jansson Stegner, Kerry James Marshall. I regularly reference a catalogue in my studio by Tilo Baumgärtel to remind me of the sort of artist that I often feel I would like to be – with his endlessly inventive and idiosyncratic world, expressive paint work and evocative use of light and colour. Sometimes we need examples like this to push out work in directions we might not have expected at the outset.

RP: It is easy to see from this roll-call of artists how realism, colour and drama are all key influences in your practice as a painter. I also noticed earlier how the unexpected juxtapositions you create in your painting can often generate humour. For an artist humour is a difficult line to walk, yet one you walk very successfully. The humour you employ is strangely subtle and disconcerting and if anything, I would describe it as being quite surrealist. What do you think of this description?

GE: I agree that there is an absurdist quality to the humour employed in the work. This is created by the 'visual contradictions' or unexpected juxtapositions that you mention. As I have said before many of these juxtapositions are invented but are based on things I have observed. We tend to accept quite absurd things within the right context: waterfalls in shopping malls or swimming in an exotic 'lake' beneath the glass dome at Center Parcs. In Disneyland you can ride a roller coaster through Everest or watch animatronic bears play country music. But it is the focus that art brings to these things - the way it holds them up to scrutiny and draws our attention to their absurdity that creates the humour.

Humour is an incredibly important vehicle for interrogating and critiquing society and politics. It is interesting how Guston's satirical view of 1970s American society, with cars full of klansmen driving around the city or the grotesque caricatures of Nixon, has become so

prescient now that Trump is in power. I said previously that I am interested in the suburbs and I believe that the most effective critique of British suburbia has been the TV sitcom, which exposes the pretensions of class through wonderfully observed caricatures: Margo from 'The Good Life' or Bob Ferris from 'The Likely Lads'. I don't want the humour in my work to seem bizarre or illogical for the sake of it; I want it to encourage the viewer to see the subjects that underpin the work anew.

RP: Thank you so much for sharing some of your thoughts and ideas with us Geraint. I feel very enriched by your answers and have gained a much deeper understanding of your practice as a painter, especially in terms of its vivid cultural and intellectual texture. More than that though, I feel you have given us a lot to think about in terms of the many roles an artist has to play within society, both in terms of acting as cultural lens and creative catalyst.

**Interview completed 28 January 2019**